

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

DISTRICT OF NEVADA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

* * *

Respondent/Plaintiff,

V.

JOHN MICHAEL BOYKINS,

ORDER

Petitioner/Defendant.

Before the Court is petitioner Jason Michael Boykins’ (“Boykins”) motion, to vacate, set aside, or correct his sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 (ECF No. 42). Boykins filed his motion considering the recent ruling in *Rehaif v. United States*, 139 S. Ct. 2191 (2019). The government opposes (ECF No. 46), arguing that Boykins’ claims are procedurally barred because he did not raise them on direct appeal. In his reply (ECF No. 47), Boykins maintains that the constitutional errors are structural.

For the reasons contained within this Order, the Court denies his motion and denies him a certificate of appealability.

I. BACKGROUND

Boykins has an extensive criminal history which, among other things, includes Unlawful Possession of a Firearm by a Previously Convicted Felon, and subsequent violations of his supervised release stemming from that conviction.

The current motion relates to Boykins' conduct on August 3, 2017, where a detective with the Sparks Police Department located a vehicle suspected to be involved with a shooting from a week earlier. After stopping the vehicle, the detective found that the driver, Boykins, had a

1 suspended driver's license. Following Boykins' arrest and upon conducting an inventory search of
 2 the vehicle he was driving, detectives found two weapons: a loaded .45 caliber, Taurus Millennium
 3 pistol, and a loaded .357 caliber, Taurus revolver.

4 In October 2018, Boykins pleaded guilty to Unlawful Possession of a Firearm by a
 5 Previously Convicted Felon. ECF No. 21. This Court sentenced Boykins to 38 months'
 6 imprisonment followed by three years of supervised release. Now, Boykins seeks to vacate his
 7 sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255.

8 **II. LEGAL STANDARD**

9 Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255, a petitioner may file a motion requesting the court which
 10 imposed sentence to vacate, set aside, or correct the sentence. 28 U.S.C. § 2255(a). Such a motion
 11 may be brought on the following grounds: (1) "the sentence was imposed in violation of the
 12 Constitution or laws of the United States;" (2) "the court was without jurisdiction to impose such
 13 sentence;" (3) "the sentence was in excess of the maximum authorized by law;" or (4) the sentence
 14 "is otherwise subject to collateral attack." *Id.*; see *United States v. Berry*, 624 F.3d 1031, 1038 (9th
 15 Cir. 2010). When a petitioner seeks relief pursuant to a right newly recognized by a decision of
 16 the United States Supreme Court, a one-year statute of limitations applies. 28 U.S.C. §
 17 2255(f). That one-year limitation period begins to run from "the date on which the right asserted
 18 was initially recognized by the Supreme Court." *Id.* § 2255(f)(3).

19 On June 21, 2019, the Supreme Court decided *Rehaif*, overturning established Ninth Circuit
 20 precedent. 139 S. Ct. 2191. In the past, the government was only required to prove that a defendant
 21 knowingly possessed a firearm under 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g) and 924(a)(2). *Id.* at 2200. Now, under
 22 *Rehaif*, the government "must prove both that the defendant knew he possessed a firearm and that
 23 he knew that he belonged to the relevant category of persons barred from possessing a firearm."
Id.

25 **III. DISCUSSION**

26 Boykins argues that by leaving out the new *Rehaif* element from the original indictment,
 27 this Court lacked jurisdiction. ECF No. 42, at 14. He further alleges the omission in the indictment
 28 violated both his Fifth Amendment guarantee that a grand jury find probable cause to support all

1 the necessary elements of a crime, and his Sixth Amendment right to effective assistance of counsel
 2 and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation. *Id.* at 16–21.

3 **A. Unconditional Guilty Plea**

4 The government contends that by pleading guilty unconditionally, Boykins waived his
 5 right to make any non-jurisdictional challenges to the indictment; specifically, his Fifth and Sixth
 6 Amendment challenges. *See Tollet v. Henderson*, 411 U.S. 258, 267 (1973). ECF No. 46, at 12.

7 As part of his plea, Boykins waived “...all collateral challenges, including any claims under
 8 28 U.S.C. § 2255, to his conviction, sentence, and the procedure by which the Court adjudicated
 9 guilt and imposed sentence, except non-waivable claims of ineffective assistance of counsel.” ECF
 10 No. 22, at 11. Consequently waiving “all non-jurisdictional defenses and cures all antecedent
 11 constitutional defects, allowing only an attack on the voluntary and intelligent character of the
 12 plea.” *United States v. Brizan*, 709 F.3d 864, 866–67 (9th Cir. 2013). Considering the plea’s cut-
 13 and-dry language, the Court finds Boykins’ claims are barred by his guilty plea even in view of
 14 the exceptions to *Tollett v. Henderson*, 411 U.S. 258 (1973).¹ Nevertheless, the Court still finds it
 15 necessary to address the jurisdictional and procedural default arguments below.

16 **B. Jurisdiction**

17 This Court “has jurisdiction of all crimes cognizable under the authority of the United
 18 States....” *Lamar v. United States*, 240 U.S. 60, 65 (1916). Any “objection that the indictment does
 19 not charge a crime against the United States goes only to the merits of the case,” and does not
 20 deprive the court of jurisdiction. *Id.*; *see also United States v. Cotton*, 535 U.S. 625, 630 (2020)
 21 (reiterating *Lamar*). Quite importantly, the Ninth Circuit and decisions within the District of
 22 Nevada have relied on the principle announced in *Cotton* in cases considering the aftermath of
 23 *Rehaif*. *See, e.g., United States v. Espinoza*, 816 F. App’x 82, 84 (9th Cir. 2020) (“[T]he
 24 indictment’s omission of the knowledge of status requirement did not deprive the district court of

25 ¹ *Tollett* limited federal habeas challenges to pre-plea constitutional violations. 411 U.S. at 267. Exceptions to this
 26 general rule include a claim which the state cannot “constitutionally prosecute.” *Class v. U.S.*, 138 S. Ct. 789, 805
 27 (2018) (quoting *Menna v. New York*, 423 U.S. 61, 63 (1975) (per curiam)). While Boykins argues such an exception
 28 exists in the present instance (ECF No. 42, at 21), the Court agrees with other well-reasoned decisions in the District
 of Nevada which hold it does not. *See United States v. Abundis*, Case No. 2:18-cr-00158-MMD-VCF-1 (D. Nev. Nov.
 30, 2020) (finding that the exceptions to *Tollett* do not apply under *Rehaif* as the claims “could have been remedied
 by a new indictment.”).

1 jurisdiction.”); *see also United States v. Miller*, Case No. 3:15-cr-00047-HDM-WGC (D. Nev.
 2 Dec. 8, 2020); *United States v. Baustamante*, Case No. 2:16-cr-00268-APG (D. Nev. Dec. 7,
 3 2020).

4 Therefore, pursuant to Ninth Circuit precedent and decisions in this District, the Court had
 5 and continues to have jurisdiction over Boykins’ case despite *Rehaif*.

6 **C. Procedural Default**

7 The government also argues that Boykins’ claims are procedurally defaulted. ECF No. 46,
 8 at 6. While a defendant certainly can question the underlying legality of his sentence or conviction,
 9 one who does not on direct appeal is procedurally defaulted from doing so unless they can
 10 demonstrate: (1) cause and prejudice; or (2) actual innocence. *See Bousley v. U.S.*, 523 U.S. 614,
 11 622 (1998) (citations omitted). “Cause” is a legitimate excuse for the default; ‘prejudice’ is actual
 12 harm resulting from the alleged constitutional violation.” *Magby v. Wawrzaszek*, 741 F.2d 240,
 13 244 (9th Cir. 1984).

14 Boykins did not challenge the validity of the indictment and/or plea on direct appeal, but
 15 instead, argues his claims have not procedurally defaulted because he can demonstrate cause and
 16 prejudice, or, in the alternative, the omission in his indictment is a structural error and therefore
 17 only requires a showing of cause. Each argument is addressed in turn.

18 **1. Cause**

19 Boykins can likely demonstrate cause. *Rehaif* overturned long standing precedent in the
 20 Ninth Circuit, and the decision’s constitutional consequences were not “reasonably available to
 21 counsel.” *Reed v. Ross*, 468 U.S. 1, 16 (1984).

22 **2. Prejudice**

23 Still, Boykins cannot demonstrate prejudice. The Ninth Circuit has found in numerous
 24 scenarios, that even if a defendant had been aware that the Government would need to prove the
 25 knowledge-of-status element, there is no reasonable probability that the outcome would have been
 26 different. *See United States v. Espinoza*, 816 F. App’x 82, 84 (9th Cir. 2020) (holding that “the
 27 failure of the indictment and plea colloquy to include the element of knowledge of felon status
 28 does not require us to vacate [the] conviction...”); *United States v. Schmidt*, 792 F. App’x 521,

1 522 (9th Cir. 2020) (“Although [defendant] did not argue below that the government was required
 2 to prove [defendant] knew he was a felon, under any standard of review there was overwhelming
 3 evidence that [defendant] knew he was a felon when he possessed the firearms at issue in this
 4 case.”); *United States v. Tuan Ngoc Luong*, 965 F.3d 973, 989 (9th Cir. 2020) (finding in the trial
 5 context that, “even if the district court had instructed the jury on the knowledge-of-status element,
 6 there is no reasonable probability that the jury would have reached a different verdict...”). In other
 7 words, the Ninth Circuit has repeatedly found no actual harm resulted from alleged constitutional
 8 violations stemming from the decision in *Rehaif* in cases involving comparable facts to Boykins.

9 Here, Boykins admitted to being a convicted felon at the time he possessed the guns. ECF
 10 No. 22, at 3. In addition, he had served more than a year in prison upon each one of five prior
 11 felony convictions spanning over twenty years. The Court is not persuaded that the inclusion of
 12 the *Rehaif* element would have changed Boykins’ decision to plead guilty or that his plea was
 13 involuntary.

14 Accordingly, there is no reasonable probability, but for the *Rehaif* error, that the outcome
 15 of the proceeding would have been different. Therefore, because Boykins has not demonstrated
 16 both cause and prejudice, he procedurally defaulted on his claims challenging the legality of his
 17 conviction.

18 **D. Structural Error**

19 Alternatively, Boykins argues that the constitutional errors are structural, therefore only
 20 requiring a showing of cause. “[C]ertain errors, termed structural errors, might affect substantial
 21 rights regardless of their actual impact on an appellant’s trial.” *United States v. Marcus*, 560 U.S.
 22 258, 263 (2010) (citations omitted). Structural errors go to the very heart of the trial and are not
 23 “simply an error in the trial process itself.” *Arizona v. Fulimante*, 499 U.S. 279, 310 (1991).

24 While the Ninth Circuit has not decided whether the knowledge-of-status element in *Rehaif*
 25 presents issues of structural error, numerous other circuits have concluded it does not. *See United*
26 States v. Nasir, 2020 WL 7041357, at *19, n.30 (3d Cir. Dec. 1, 2020); *United States v. Coleman*,
 27 961 F.3d 1024, 1030 (8th Cir. 2020); *United States v. Payne*, 964 F.3d 652, 657 (7th Cir. 2020);
 28 *United States v. Lavalais*, 960 F.3d 180, 187 (5th Cir. 2020); *United States v. Trujillo*, 960 F.3d

1 1196, 1207 (10th Cir. 2020). The Court agrees with these circuit courts and concludes that *Rehaif*
2 likely does not involve the limited class of errors the Supreme Court has deemed structural.

3 **E. Certificate of Appealability is Denied**

4 To proceed with an appeal of this Order, Boykins must receive a certificate of appealability
5 from the Court. 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(1); FED. R. APP. P. 22; 9TH CIR. R. 22-1; *Allen v. Ornoski*,
6 435 F.3d 946, 950-951 (9th Cir. 2006). For the Court to grant a certificate of appealability, the
7 petitioner must make "a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right." 28 U.S.C. §
8 2253(c)(2); *Slack v. McDaniel*, 529 U.S. 473, 483-84 (2000). And the petitioner bears the burden
9 of demonstrating that the issues are debatable among reasonable jurists; that a court could resolve
10 the issues differently; or that the issues are "adequate to deserve encouragement to proceed
11 further." *Slack*, 529 U.S. at 483-84 (citation omitted).

12 As discussed above, Boykins has failed to raise a meritorious challenge to his conviction
13 and sentence pursuant to the Ninth Circuit's decisions following *Rehaif*. As such, the Court finds
14 that he has failed to demonstrate that reasonable jurists would find the Court's assessment of his
15 claims debatable or wrong. See *Allen*, 435 F.3d at 950–51. Therefore, the Court denies Boykins a
16 certificate of appealability.

17 **IV. CONCLUSION**

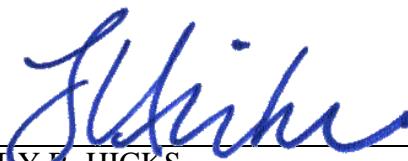
18 IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that Boykins' motion to vacate, set aside, or correct his
19 sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 (ECF No. 42) is **DENIED**.

20 IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that a certificate of appealability is **DENIED**.

21 IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the Clerk of Court **ENTER** a separate and final
22 Judgment denying Boykins' § 2255 motion. See *Kingsbury v. United States*, 900 F.3d 1147,
23 1150 (9th Cir. 2018).

24 IT IS SO ORDERED.

25 DATED this 6th day of January, 2021.


26 LARRY R. HICKS
27 UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE
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